

RUDOLPH SCHLEIDEN AND THE VISIT  
TO RICHMOND, APRIL 25, 1861

BY

RALPH HASWELL LUTZ

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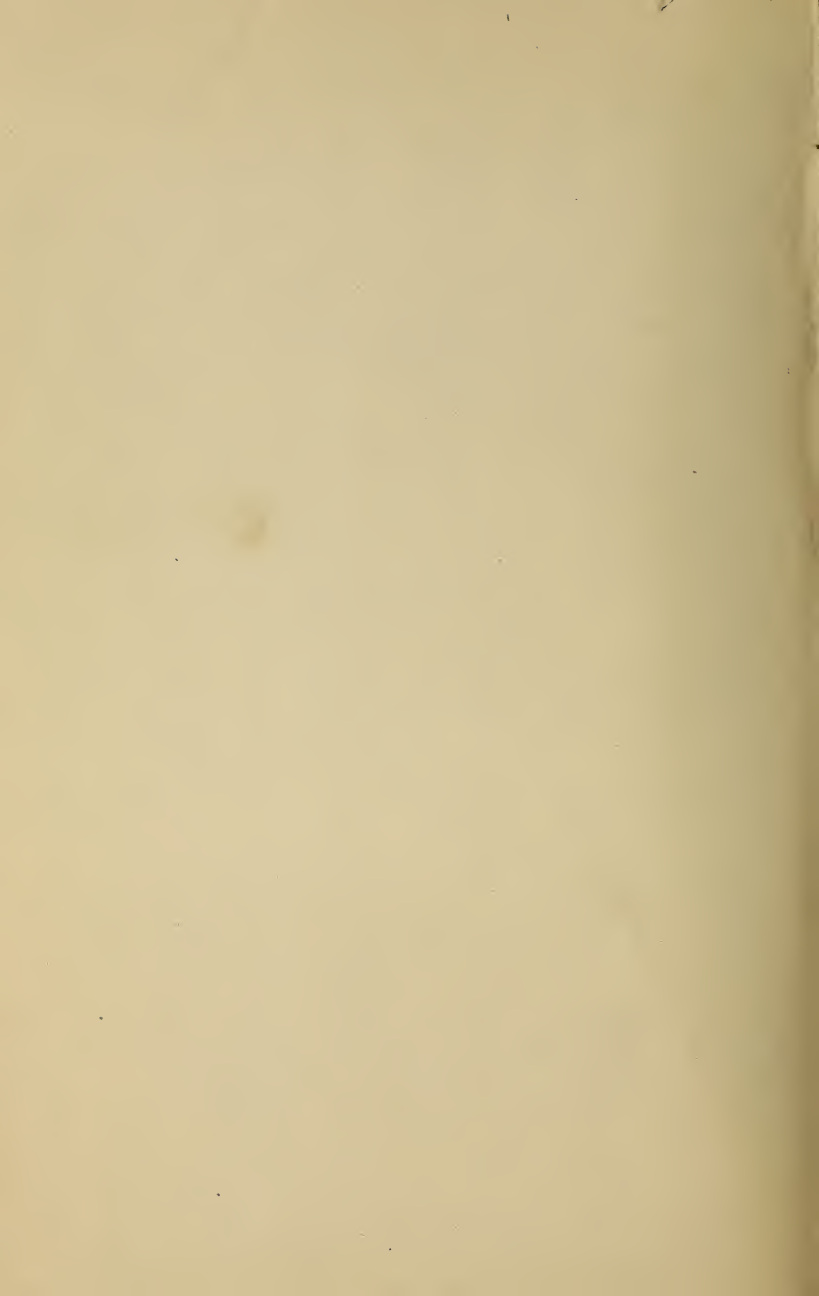
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XI. RUDOLF SCHLEIDEN AND THE VISIT TO RICHMOND,  
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*Assistant Professor in the University of Washington.*

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RUDOLF SCHLEIDEN AND THE VISIT TO RICHMOND, APRIL 25,  
1861.<sup>1</sup>

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By RALPH HASWELL LUTZ.

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While working in Germany on the subject of "The relations between Germany and the United States during the Civil War," I secured permission from the Senate of Bremen to study in the State Archives. In these archives are preserved the dispatches of the minister resident, Dr. Schleiden, from 1861 to 1864, and the dispatches of the Hanseatic Legation from 1864 to 1865. Dr. von Bippen, the State archivist of Bremen, gave access to all the diplomatic correspondence of Schleiden while Minister at Washington, except three confidential dispatches of 1861—Schleiden's No. 50, No. 51, and No. 52 of April 24 and May 2 to the committee of foreign affairs of Bremen—which dealt with Schleiden's peace negotiations at Richmond.

These dispatches are now in my possession. Mr. Frederic Bancroft, when editing the now published correspondence of Carl Schurz, found among the Schurz papers copies of these confidential documents. Mr. E. D. Adams had translations made of these three dispatches, as well as of the other Schleiden manuscripts in the Schurz papers, and to these I have had access. This paper is a study of these documents and the diplomatic correspondence examined at Bremen.

Rudolf Mathias Schleiden was born on the family estate at Ascheberg, in Schleswig, July 22, 1815. After taking his doctor's degree at the University of Berlin, he entered the Danish customs service, in which he remained until the rebellion of Schleswig-Holstein from Denmark in 1848. Leaving Copenhagen he hastened to Kiel and received from the provisional government of the duchies an appointment as delegate to the parliament of Frankfort, which was then assembling to formulate a constitution for Germany. At the capital of the German confederation he became acquainted with Dr. Johann Smidt, Bremen's greatest statesman and one of the founders of Germany's commercial greatness. After the failure of the German liberal movement of 1848, Schleiden withdrew to Bremen, and in 1853 was appointed minister of that Republic to the United States.

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<sup>1</sup> This paper was read at the meeting of the Pacific coast branch, Nov. 27, 1915.

No foreign diplomat watched the approaching Civil War with such concern and knowledge of events as Schleiden. "Since the times of the Revolutionary War," he wrote his Government on New Year's day, "no year has begun under such threatening conditions for the United States as the year 1861." Almost all the democratic leaders whom Schleiden met in the diplomatic society of the Capital were open advocates of secession. Even Seward's speech in the Senate on January 14 failed to allay the growing sentiment, Schleiden reported to his Government. After the close of that memorable address, which many hoped would suggest a panacea for the national ills, Hemphill of Texas exclaimed to Schleiden: "That would have been a fine address for the Fourth of July, but we are going to secede."

But while all the southern statesmen were preparing for secession, Seward calmly assured the minister of Bremen that secession was a party game, and, with the commencement of the new administration, order would return. Then, on the 26th of January, the future Secretary of State unfolded to Schleiden that fantastic plan of provoking a foreign war, which Lincoln a few months later so wisely ignored. "If the Lord would only give the United States an excuse for a war with England, France, or Spain," Seward said, "that would be the best means of reestablishing internal peace." Again on February 10, Seward conversed with Schleiden on this subject and complained that momentarily there was no foreign complication which offered an excuse to break with a foreign power.

Although Schleiden believed this plan too intricate to be dangerous, he nevertheless was extremely anxious to ascertain Lincoln's views on foreign policy. On February 26 he reported to his Government that, "like a thief in the night, the future President arrived here on the early morning of the 23d." Several days later Schleiden was introduced to Lincoln, and two days before the inauguration he gave a dinner in honor of Lincoln. Gen. Scott, four of the future cabinet officers, and several diplomats were present. The general, who sat next to the President, remarked, during the course of the dinner, that he had not voted for Lincoln, as he had not exercised his right to vote for 54 years. "But I have voted for you, general," was Lincoln's quick reply, "and you will have to make up for it in war." Still he remarked to the other members of the dinner party that he didn't hope to give the general a chance very soon.

As became a good diplomat of the old school, Schleiden discussed diplomacy with the President-elect after dinner. About the only thing he learned to inform his Government was, however, the terse statement: "I don't know anything about diplomacy. I will be very apt to make blunders." To illustrate the President's humor even in the face of the disruption of the Union, Schleiden related to his

Government that when the peace commissioners of Virginia to the conference at Washington asked Lincoln to remove the Federal troops from Fort Sumter, the President replied: "Why not? If you will guarantee to me the State of Virginia I shall remove the troops. A State for a fort is no bad business."

The fall of Fort Sumter and the threatening prospect of a general war had cast a gloom over Washington, and none felt it more keenly than Schleiden. The chief interest of Bremen in America lay in the carrying trade with Europe. The red and white banner of the little Hanseatic Republic floated from the masts of more ships in American ports than the flag of any other foreign nation excepting Great Britain. To avert civil war and the consequent disruption of trade seemed to Schleiden a foremost duty. He became, therefore, an earnest advocate of mediation, but toward the end of April, 1861, the planned mediation of the diplomatic corps failed. In fact, on April 23 Seward published a communication from the State Department to the governor of Maryland, which declared that the differences between the States could not be submitted to any foreign arbitrament under any circumstances.

Schleiden thereupon offered his services to Seward in the hope that he alone might be able to mediate an armistice which would maintain a peaceful status until Congress could assemble. On the morning of April 24 Schleiden discussed the question with Seward. As Alexander H. Stephens, Vice President of the Southern Confederacy, was then in Richmond, Schleiden proposed to journey to the capital of Virginia and commence confidential discussions with him. Seward at once favored this plan, but stated that "neither the President nor the entire Cabinet could expressly authorize such pourparlers or draw up conditions under which it would be willing to entertain an armistice."

Later in the day Schleiden had a conference with President Lincoln and Secretary Seward. Lincoln expressed his hearty thanks that Schleiden was "willing to make an attempt of contributing to the prevention of bloodshed, and regretted that Schleiden had not gone to Richmond without consulting him or Seward." However, when Schleiden explained that such a course would have laid him open to the suspicion of intriguing with the South against the sole legitimately recognized Government, Lincoln agreed with him. The President stated that his designs for peace as expressed in his official statements had given ground through misinterpretation to the charge of imbecility and fear, and that he had resolved not to discuss the subject further. He repeated that "he did not have in mind any aggression against the Southern States, but merely the safety of the Government in the capital and the possibility to govern everywhere."

On this account Lincoln said that he could neither authorize negotiations nor invite proposals, but he promised to consider carefully all proposals which Schleiden might find himself called upon to submit.

The manner in which the President expressed himself seemed to indicate to Schleiden that he desired him to attempt negotiations with Stephens without any special authorization. "I therefore tried," Schleiden wrote to his Government, "to cause the gentlemen to state whether the suspension of all hostilities for the term of three months would be accepted under a simultaneous revocation of the two opposing proclamations, the one referring to the issue of letters of marque and reprisal, the other to the blockade of the southern ports." Lincoln declined nevertheless to make any definite statement. Seward, who was determined to send Schleiden, prevailed upon him to commence negotiations without any definite proposals, and procured for him a pass through the Union lines. On the evening of April 24 Schleiden departed secretly for Richmond and arrived on the afternoon of the next day.

On the railway journey through northern Virginia Schleiden discovered that conditions were decidedly unfavorable to his plan for an armistice. Volunteers crowded the stations. The newspapers demanded in stirring articles an immediate attack on Washington and denounced any attempt by the South to secure a truce. In Richmond the ordinance of secession had just been published, and on the day of Schleiden's arrival the State convention ratified the provisional constitution of the Southern Confederacy. The lobby of the hotel at which he stayed was filled with excited politicians anxious to ascertain the aim of his trip.

Immediately on arriving in Richmond, Schleiden wrote to Vice President Stephens asking for an interview, to which the latter replied that he would be happy to see him immediately. During the course of a confidential talk which lasted for three hours Stephens declared that he believed all attempts to settle peacefully the differences between the two sections were futile. "The actions of Seward and Lincoln had filled the South with suspicion," Stephens said, "but neither the Government at Montgomery nor the authorities of Virginia contemplated an attack on Washington." He added that if Walker, the southern secretary of war, had said after the fall of Fort Sumter that he hoped to be in Washington on May 1, it was merely a flowery phrase. "Public opinion was embittered against the United States because of the strengthening of Fort Pickens and Fort Monroe, and the destruction of the arsenal at Harper's Ferry, and the navy yard at Norfolk. Maryland's unexpected rising in favor of the South seemed to make it a condition of peace that Maryland be allowed to join the Southern Confederacy."



In view of these facts Stephens favored a "de facto truce through tactful avoidance of an attack on both sides," rather than a formal armistice. As he had no authorization to make a binding declaration in the name of the Confederacy, he asked for time to consider Schleiden's proposals, and "declared himself ready at the same time to accept a letter from Schleiden on the subject of the armistice and to answer the same."

In a formal letter, written after the conference, Schleiden asked for a frank statement of the terms which the South would be ready to grant and accept for the purpose of securing the maintenance of peace and gaining time for reflection. "I believe that your complying with my above request," wrote Schleiden, "offers the last prospect of attaining a peaceful solution of the present crisis."

To this letter Stephens replied, stating that the Government of the Confederacy had resorted to every honorable means to avoid war, and that if the United States had any desire to adjust amicably the questions at issue it should indicate its willingness in some authoritative way to the South. However, he added, referring to the United States, "it seems to be their policy to wage a war for the recapture of former possessions looking to the ultimate coercion and subjugation of the people of the Confederate States to their power and domain. With such an object on their part persevered in, no power on earth can arrest or prevent a most bloody conflict."

After a last conference with Stephens, Schleiden returned to Washington, reaching the Capital on the afternoon of the 27th. Immediately upon his arrival he addressed a letter to President Lincoln, inclosing his correspondence with Stephens. After stating that the Southern States were arming in self-defense, he reported that if the South were assured the President would recommend to Congress when it assembles on July 4 a speedy and amicable adjustment of the differences and the propriety of treating with commissioners of the Southern States, there would not be any danger of a conflict.

At the request of the President, Seward replied to this letter in an unofficial and confidential communication from the Department of State. Seward informed Schleiden that Lincoln was of the opinion that a continuance of the negotiations would be without any beneficial result. In view of this fact, Schleiden wrote to Stephens:

It is only now and with deep regret that I can inform you that my attempt at contributing toward gaining time for reflection and if possible a favorable adjustment of the existing differences has failed.

Finally, on May 2, 1861, Schleiden wrote to his Government:

I regret to report to the honorable Senate committee that my attempts to mediate a truce and thereby to furnish the opposing parties time for quiet reflection has not been successful.

Such a step as Schleiden took in these negotiations is almost an unheard of thing in the annals of modern diplomacy. His visit to Richmond is undoubtedly the last effort to bring about a compromise between North and South. Of primary importance is the fact that Schleiden was practically sent to Richmond by Seward. Is not this incident unknown to history?

After the failure of his visit to Richmond, Schleiden was soon busied with the various diplomatic questions arising out of the beginning of the Civil War. When the principal powers of Europe issued declarations of neutrality in the War between the States, Schleiden asked his Government for instructions. Nothing exhibits the friendliness of Bremen for the Union more than the simple reply of the senate that there was no necessity for issuing any sort of declaration. In fact, Southern newspapers were continually announcing in large headlines, "Free cities of Germany aid the Lincoln despotism."

The news of the capture of Mason and Slidell fell like a thunderbolt on the diplomats at Washington. War appeared inevitable. "However one may consider this affair from a judicial standpoint, it is a great misfortune," Schleiden wrote home. On December 14 he had an interview with Seward, who assured him that the affair would be settled peacefully with England. At the same time Seward denied most emphatically that Wilkes had acted under instructions from Secretary Welles of the Navy, and added: "I don't care a bit what Mr. Welles said."

Despite the peaceful assurances of Seward, Schleiden was extremely pessimistic, believing that the differences in the cabinet precluded any statesmanlike adjustment of the difficulty. Just a few days before his interview with the Secretary of State, Blair said to him:

Mr. Seward is a transcendental philosopher, with no faith in his own philosophy, and a tricky politician who believes only in the meanest arts.

With such differences in the cabinet, Schleiden informed the senate of Bremen that the only hope in peace lay in the judgment of Lincoln. "The President," he also wrote that body, "has stated that no instructions were sent to Wilkes, and he is incapable of an intentional untruth." Several days after the arrival of the instructions of the British cabinet for Lord Lyons, Schleiden had a long talk with him and gathered that the affair would be peacefully settled. When the commissioners were finally released he wrote to Bremen:

The moral courage with which the Government, and especially Mr. Seward, have withstood public opinion deserves, at least, recognition.

Later in the war, when Lincoln placed Admiral Wilkes in command of the squadron at San Francisco he spoke of it to Schleiden as a pacific measure.

The dramatic arrival of the French dispatch advising the release of Mason and Slidell at the very moment when the cabinet was discussing the subject is a matter of history. The Austrian and Prussian notes, which were of the same tenor, arrived too late to have any influence on the decision. Seward nevertheless accepted them as a token of national good will and had the texts published, although Schleiden informed his Government that Seward privately condemned the action of the two powers, saying that all good advice was annoying after one had made up one's mind. In the spring of 1862 Schleiden asked his Government for a leave of absence in order to return to Europe. Seward had especially advised him to embrace the moment to visit Germany, although the Secretary of War said, "You had better wait 60 days, in order to see the complete end of the rebellion." Schleiden regarded the outlook as extremely unfavorable. Simon Cameron, with whom Schleiden had an interview before sailing, shared this view, and added, by way of explanation: "We want a great man and have not got him, but I ought not to have said that."

Schleiden did not return from Europe until December, 1862. While in Paris he was received on December 18 by the French minister of foreign affairs, Drouyn de Lhuys, who discussed American affairs with him at great length. "I am concerned with neither Union nor disunion, neither with slavery nor with abolition," he said. While at Bremen Schleiden had been appointed minister at Washington for the two other Hanseatic cities of Hamburg and Lübeck, and on his return to his post he presented his new credentials. Owing to the cabinet crisis the President did not formally receive him until December 23.

The emancipation policy and affairs in Mexico were now engaging the attention of the diplomatic corps. Schleiden was opposed to the freeing of the slaves at that juncture and often cited the query of Machiavelli as to whether it was harder to make freemen slaves or slaves free. He was extremely pessimistic, too, regarding the condition of affairs in Mexico and considered a war with France as being far from an impossibility. In private conversation with Schleiden, Seward expressed himself very strongly against the French, whose expulsion from Mexico he regarded as merely a matter of time. The French minister at Washington repeatedly said to Schleiden in speaking of Mexico, "It is my nightmare."

Many of Schleiden's dispatches related purely to military affairs and often contained biting sarcasm. In the summer of 1863 he wrote to Bremen that Lincoln remarked after the Battle of Chancellorsville: "We would have won, had Hooker fallen on the morning of May 2." After Gettysburg Schleiden informed his Govern-

ment that Lincoln was disgusted with Meade's ability as a strategist because he had not taken up a position between Lee and the Potomac to fight a decisive battle.

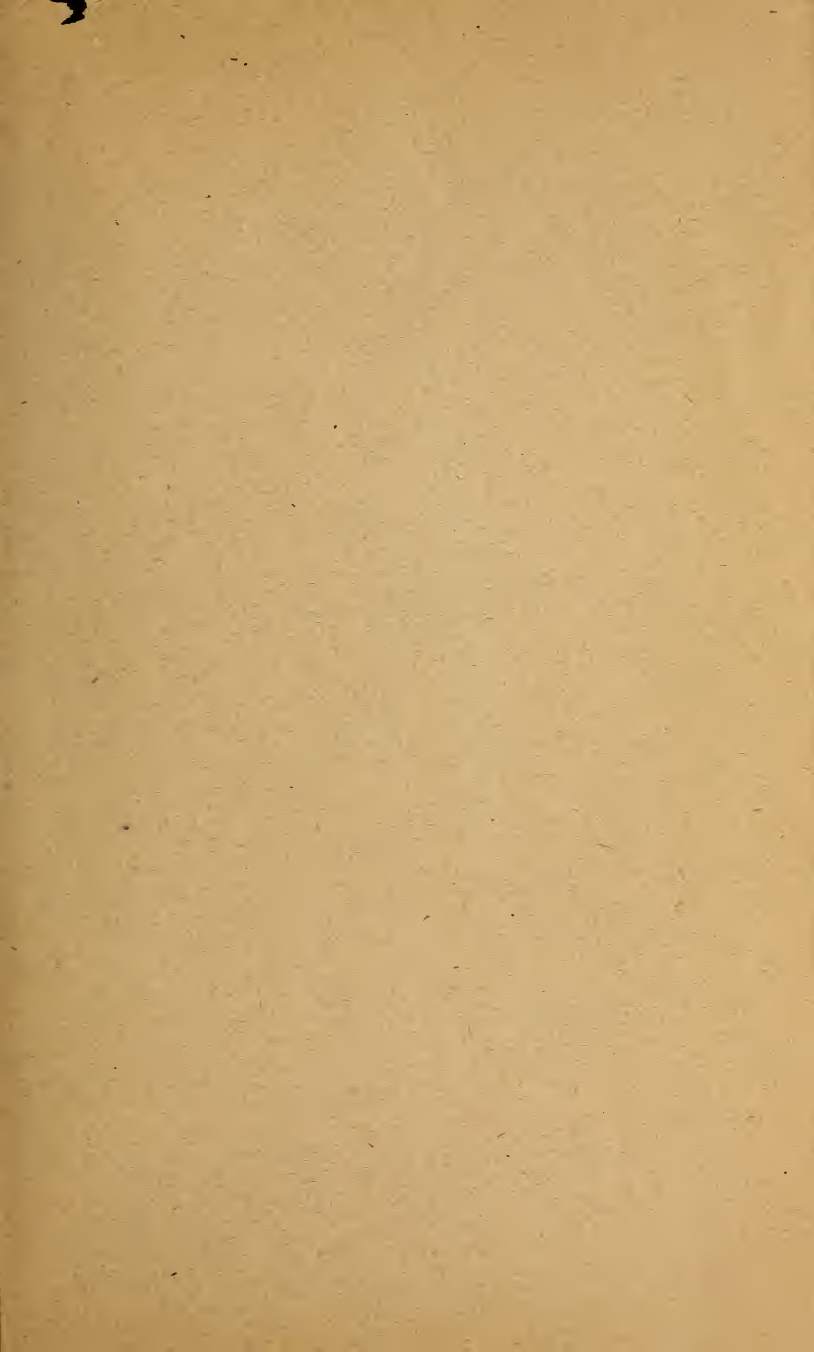
The reelection of Lincoln was almost unanimously predicted by the diplomatic corps in January, 1864. In February Schleiden mentioned in a dispatch that Lincoln said to Judge Thomas, of Massachusetts, that he would be satisfied if his successor was elected from the Republican Party. If that did not take place the President feared that he would spend the rest of his life in jail for repeated violations of the Constitution. About this time Chase remarked to Schleiden that the war would never end so long as Lincoln was President. In the spring of 1864 Schleiden left Washington for Europe to return only after the Civil War had become a matter of history.

Schleiden was one of the most popular members of the diplomatic corps at Washington during the period of the Civil War. His voluminous dispatches to the senate of Bremen contain excellent contemporary views and accurate accounts of the great men and events of the struggle. The vividness of his comments, his accuracy, and above all his profound knowledge of American affairs, make his diplomatic correspondence valuable source material for the history of the war. In conclusion I wish to express the hope that some day these dispatches of Schleiden may be published.









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